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NEWS RELEASE

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B.C.'s Auditor General concludes more needs to be done to eliminate forest worker death and serious injury

VICTORIA – Today, Auditor General John Doyle released his audit of progress toward government's goal of eliminating forest worker deaths and serious injuries.

Four years ago, government committed to cutting the number of deaths and serious injuries by half within three years. Several months later, the goal was revised to zero deaths and serious injuries. In 2006 the Minister of Forests and Range called for an independent review of forest safety issues – concerns shared by the Minister of Labour and Citizens' Services.

"The goal of eliminating forest worker death or serious injury has not been achieved. Strong leadership and commitment is required now to guide, complement and support efforts taken by industry", said Doyle.

"Government's involvement in forest worker safety is fragmented among several bodies. Existing occupational health and safety regulations have not been vigorously enforced for all forest industry workers", he went on to say. "There has been no detectable impact on rates of death and serious injury."

"If government is to meet its forest worker safety goals, action is required on a number of fronts", said Doyle. He makes 15 recommendations to the Ministry of Labour and Citizens' Services, Ministry of Forest and Range and WorkSafeBC, to improve forest worker safety.

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Report highlights attached

2007/08 Report #5 – Preventing Fatalities and Serious Injuries in B.C. Forests: Progress Needed.

For further information, please contact:
Office of the Auditor General, 8 Bastion Square, Victoria, B.C. V8V 1X4
Tel: 250 387-6803 or Toll free *Enquiry BC* at 1 800 663-7867 (in Vancouver 604 660-2421)
A copy of the full report is available on our website at: **http://bcauditor.com**

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REPORT HIGHLIGHTS **January 23, 2008**

Preventing Fatalities and Serious Injuries in B.C. Forests: Progress Needed

What are the costs of forest worker deaths and serious injury?

The impact of serious injuries and deaths in the forestry industry are significant. For the families and friends of workers, the impact can be devastating and the costs beyond measure.

Over the last decade, WorkSafeBC has paid out an average of $69 million per year in claim costs for workplace serious injuries and deaths in the forest sector. However, other costs emerge beyond that claims process. The growing number of forest workers who are not covered by the workers compensation system, because they are not employees, present an additional burden upon the public health care system if they become injured on the job. No one is reporting those costs. This means that the total cost of forest workplace injuries and deaths over the last 10 years is at least $690 million, and is likely very much more.

How dangerous is forestry work?

In 2006 alone, 13 workers were killed and 73 serious injuries occurred. Forest worker safety in British Columbia compares poorly to other industries.

- *Workers are more likely to die doing this work.* Forestry work in British Columbia has three times the fatality rate of other high risk industries in the province.
- *Injuries sustained by forestry workers tend to be more severe.* Injury in forestry work is much more likely to result in long-term disability than injury in other high risk sectors, such as construction or manufacturing.
- *Oil, gas and mining work is safer.* Forestry's rate of injury resulting in time away from work is more than twice that of the oil, gas and mining sector.
- *Working in a mill is safer than working in the woods.* The rate of injury resulting in death in forestry is 10 times higher than for wood and paper manufacturing.

Purpose of the audit

The purpose of the audit was to assess progress toward fulfilling the commitment to eliminate forest worker death and serious injury.

Conclusions and recommendations

The government's efforts are just being implemented and have not yet proven to be effective in radically reducing serious injury and death in the forest industry. There has been no detectable impact on rates of death and serious injury.

The government's involvement in forest safety is fragmented among several bodies. No ministry or other government agency has been assigned overall responsibility to coordinate changes that could improve forest worker safety.

Existing occupational health and safety regulations have not been vigorously enforced for all forest industry workers.

Action is required on a number of fronts if government is to meet its forest worker safety goal.

The report contains 15 recommendations for improving forest worker safety. The Ministry of Labour and Citizens' Services and the Ministry of Forest and Range have accepted all recommendations.

Key findings:

- *Responsibility for safety has been transferred to contractors*: The current expectation in the industry is that the smallest contractors and subcontractors (firms that may typically employ five or fewer workers) will carry the largest burden of worker safety. These smaller firms, many of whom are self-employed individuals, generally lack the knowledge, organization and financial resources to meet safety responsibilities.

- *Planning for safety is weak*: Currently, timber harvest planning does not include safety as a major goal. Plans are not developed or reviewed by safety experts, and the people reviewing plans lack the expertise to make safety assessments. In coal mining in this province, both the extraction plan and the equipment to be used must be reviewed for safety, and authorized, before any activity takes place. No equivalent process exists in timber extraction.

- *There is not enough on-site supervision*: At present, supervision in British Columbia's forest industry is spotty and very often entirely absent. Forest industry culture still makes a virtue of working without supervision. Traditionally, the industry has considered some tasks, such as tree falling, as not needing close supervision. Yet some of the most serious incidents happen in this activity.

- *Compliance and enforcement activities are not sufficient to eliminate death and serious injury*: Inspections, education and enforcement activity have not been sufficient to eliminate death and serious injury. WorkSafeBC's inspections and prevention sections cut staffing from 2002 to 2004, just at the time when large forestry firms were disappearing and many small contractors were being hired by forest licensees to do the most dangerous work. More recently, some small increase in personnel has occurred, but that increase has not been matched to the risk presented by the loss of forest worker safety infrastructure.

- *Information is not being adequately analyzed*: Because no government agency is currently monitoring *all* activity in the forest sector, important analytical work is not being done. No government body has the lead for monitoring the entire forest industry and reporting on progress in eliminating death and serious injury of forestry workers.

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